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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses three types of writing experiences, "Writing Roulette," "The Even-Steven Swap Game," and "The Open-Ended Story with a Slant," that can be used in a writing workshop for disabled readers at the secondary level. Each activity emphasizes writing but provides motivation for students to read each other's work. Students will have little or no difficulty in the reading since both the vocabulary and sentence structure are at the students' level. From these experiences the students can build self-confidence and can be exposed to a broad variety of language experiences that engage their interests and imaginations. (MB)

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WRITING WORKSHOPS AND THE TEACHING OF READING

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Many of the problems which are endemic among middle school and senior high school youngsters who have difficulty in learning how to read effectively are overcome in writing workshops. Disabled readers at the secondary level often have a bad attitude toward reading. This attitude stems from their having developed bad self-images during their elementary school years, and these negative self-images are directly connected with their inability to perform at anticipated levels in the basic skills.

When these youngsters reach secondary school, their problems are intensified by a number of factors: (1) they are developing mature interests, yet the reading materials available for use with them are geared to younger, less mature students; (2) materials which approach their normal interest levels tend to be beyond their vocabulary levels; (3) writing that is consistent with their interest levels frequently is expressed in longer sentence units than they can handle with reasonable comprehension; (4) much of the material available to them is written from a cultural bias which is alien to their experience; and (5) they see little importance in and have little desire to read what is available to them.

Most of these problems can be overcome in writing workshops, the normal and natural outcome of which is to have students read each others' work. Most students are eager to read what their classmates have written, so motivation for reading is high in the writing workshop environment.

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Techniques and Tactics

Activities for writing workshops are dictated largely by the types of students taking part in them. The possibilities available to the imaginative and creative teacher are virtually limitless.

In working with secondary school students who have reading disabilities, teachers must devise ways of making reading an ancillary rather than a central activity for them. If students are involved in situations in which the compulsion to read is strong and comes from within them, typical motivational problems will cease to exist. Not all of the students' reading problems will disappear; but a major barrier in encouraging reading disabled secondary school students to read--the attitudinal barrier--will be overcome.

An informal situation, in which students can seek help from their classmates rather than from the teacher, should be the aim of the writing workshop which should, in many respects, resemble the composing room of a newspaper. Activity, motion, and healthy noise may be indications that a writing workshop is functioning productively.

Three types of writing experiences that work well with reading disabled secondary school students are "Writing Roulette," "The Even-Steven Swap Game," and "The Open-Ended Story with a Slant." Used in the order suggested here, one leads gracefully toward the other. Writing Roulette is a good technique to use early in a term when students do not know each other well and when the teacher might not yet have gained the kind of control which would allow for group activity. The Even-Steven Swap Game involves group activity for those who want it and permits those who prefer to work alone to do so. It is a more advanced technique than Writing Roulette and demands more controlled skills than the earlier activity. The Open-Ended Story with a Slant is yet more sophisticated. Each activity, while it emphasizes writing, necessitates

reading; yet the reading that is demanded is generally engaged in with little or no difficulty largely because typical motivational problems have been overcome and because both the vocabulary and sentence structure are at the students' level.

Writing Roulette

The sight of a blank page intimidates even some professional writers. It is understandable that a student who has experienced little success in reading and writing quails at the thought of filling an empty page. What he needs to achieve before he pays any attention to matters like conventional spelling, correct punctuation, and standard usage, as important as such matters are, is fluency. He must translate thought patterns into their visual counterparts--words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs.

In Writing Roulette, everyone including the teacher must have a blank sheet of paper and something to write with. The teacher should also have a simple kitchen timer. The instructions are uncomplicated: "When I give the signal, we are all going to write anything we want to for a short period of time. If you cannot think of anything to write about, just select a word that you like--petunia or swordfish or jaguar--and write it over and over again. But whatever you do, KEEP WRITING. DO NOT STOP UNTIL THE BELL RINGS. Begin writing." The timer should be set for about three minutes. When the bell rings, everyone should stop. If some students are in mid-sentence or mid-word, so be it. Collect the papers and redistribute them. Then give the instructions, "Read what is on the paper you received and begin writing where the first writer left off. Write until the bell rings." Set the timer for about four minutes.

Ideally, papers will be exchanged three or four times. Students will do

quite a bit of reading, although they will not really be aware that they are engaging in a reading exercise as well as in a writing exercise. At the end, as many of the papers should be read aloud as time permits. If teachers wish to take the exercise one step farther, they can ask students on a subsequent day to rewrite the paper to which they were the final contributor, making it as interesting as possible. This will engage the student in working with sophisticated skills related to diction, sentence structure, style, unity, and coherence. Such skills, approached from a writing base, will make students more appreciative and understanding readers.

In the Writing Roulette exercise, it is rare that students elect to write one word over and over again, even though they are given that option. On those rare occasions that a student writes petunia or jaguar 75 or 100 times, the second writer will take up and write prose related to the word which has been repeated. And the student who has written a single word repeatedly in the first three minutes, will not continue to do so when the papers have been redistributed.

The Even-Steven Swap Game

This game is best engaged in as a group activity, particularly if the students have difficulty with reading and writing. As a group activity, severely disabled students can participate without having to reveal the extent of their disabilities to anyone. At the oral level, they may contribute significantly and gain the self-confidence which will enable them to make progress in attaining greater proficiency in reading and writing.

The teacher begins this game by saying, "Today we are going to make a swap. I will give you ten words and you will give me a story in which each of the ten words is used. You may work by yourself or with one or two other

people. If you do not recognize some of the words on the sheet you receive, either look them up in the dictionary or ask me. At the end of the hour, we will compare what you have written with what other people have written."

The teacher should find a brief newspaper or magazine article which reports an occurrence, usually a mysterious event or an accident or a crime. The teacher should list alphabetically either the ten longest or the ten most difficult words from the selection and mimeograph them. A typical list might contain the following: fatality, investigated, juvenile, negligence, oncoming, overturned, pedestrians, semi-trailer, vehicle, witnesses.

As the students grapple with the words, some word attack skills and dictionary skills come into play. If students ask the teacher for a definition, the teacher should pronounce the word and use it in a sentence to see whether anyone can glean the definition from the sound or from contextual clues. The teacher might have students sound a word out syllable by syllable.

Once the students begin writing, they will necessarily read each others' contributions and they will wrestle coöperatively with stylistic problems. They will also deal with matters of unity and coherence.

As the period draws to a close, the teacher should save time so that students can read their initial efforts aloud. At this point, the teacher might pass out a mimeographed copy of the news story from which the ten key words were drawn, so that students can compare what they have written with the actual account as it appears in a newspaper or magazine. Or, if it seems appropriate, the teacher may continue the exercise the following day, getting students to regroup to work on revision and rewriting. In this case, the final writing should be on a ditto master containing the story and the name of each student who has worked on it. The ditto master should be run and

copies of the story distributed to everyone in class. It also gives students an ego boost to see their work posted on bulletin boards either within the classroom or about the school. Writing is best done for an audience if it is to have meaning to those who produce it. And once it reaches an audience, the writing exercise leads directly into a reading exercise of the sort that even the disabled reader stands a good chance of being able to handle.

The Open-Ended Story with a Slant

This exercise goes one step beyond the sort of open-ended story which is discussed and completed either through discussion or through writing. In order to carry this exercise out effectively, the teacher must insist that students work alone. No collaboration is to be permitted, for reasons which will soon be apparent.

The teacher should construct a story which is brief, action-packed, and which leads rapidly toward a climax. The story should be typed up and reproduced for distribution to each student. A typical story might be the following:

Version A

It was a windy night in late October. Mary had not wanted to go out alone, but the movie at the Midway was far too good to miss and was to be on for only one night. And, since everyone else had seen the movie the first time it was in town, Mary could find no one who wanted to go along. Now the movie was over and it was ten o'clock. The wind howled. The eight blocks home seemed like 80 miles to Mary. The streets were darker than dark, the trees swayed wildly in the air

as the wind nipped away at them, and there was not a light to be seen in any of the houses that Mary passed. Even the traffic light on Elm and Main was not working, a victim of the high winds. And just as Mary turned from Elm onto Main, a man leaped onto the sidewalk from behind a huge oak tree. He blocked Mary's path. Mary's heart pounded wildly and then. . . . . .

The duplicated story should not be marked Verson A as the above story is. But the story should exist in two versions, the only difference in the versions being that in Version B, the name of the central character should be Mark. As students work toward their resolutions, some of their sex role biases usually emerge, and this provides an excellent basis for discussion. The completion of the open-ended story should take 20 to 30 minutes. If the students have followed closely the admonition to work independently on their stories, they will be quite surprised at some of the endings their classmates have produced. Typically, when I have used this technique, Mary has fled or been rescued by a brave male who happens onto the scene just in the nick of time. In many of the endings involving Mark, he also fled, but he is equally likely to stay and fight--and, of course, win. In some endings, Mary has fainted, whereas Mark has never done so. In some instances Mary has begged to be spared, but Mark has always either stood his ground or fled with an athletic prowess which would become a red-blooded male.

Any open-ended story which can, in two very similar versions, lead to an ending which reveals to students something about their value systems

can be used to good effect in promoting reading instruction, because students in this situation will be eager to read the endings which their classmates have produced. Also, teachers can suggest readings which deal with value situations similar to the ones in the open-ended stories. If all of this is done in connection with a writing exercise, the reading part of the exercise, which comes of necessity, will be unselfconscious. Students who might find it difficult to read from a book or magazine will find that they can read what other students have written. In classes that are grouped relatively homogeneously, the writing to be read will be at approximately the level of difficulty that students in the class can handle.

Reading and the Secondary Student

The first task of the secondary school teacher who is dealing with reading disabled students is to work at building self-confidence, at repairing damaged self-images. This cannot be done if teachers insist that high school students do more of the things that they have been failing at for the six or seven years previous to their entering junior high school. If such students are ever to learn how to read competently, they must be exposed to a broad variety of language experiences that engage their interests and imaginations. From these experiences will come the need for them to work on perfecting their language skills.

Few people talk about reading readiness at the secondary level. However, if teachers at that level are dealing with students who are severely handicapped in reading, perhaps to the point of being functionally illiterate, they must work on assessing readiness, on engaging students in activities that will bring them to the brink of needing to read. Until students have a sense of urgency about something they are doing--and there are precious few classroom situations in which such a sense is imparted--they will have little inner drive to read.